

After welcoming Sephardic Jews, Spain rejects thousands of citizenship requests

By TOI staff and Agencies : 4-4 minutes

Spain has been widely rejecting applications for citizenship by the descendants of Sephardic Jews expelled from the country more than 500 years ago, according to [The New York Times](#).

The Spanish government has extended citizenship to 34,000 people since advancing the 2015 law to redress the “historical mistake” Spain committed when it forced its Jewish population to convert or go into exile in 1492.

But according to The New York Times, which cited Spanish government data, while just a single applicant was denied citizenship before this year, 3,000 applications have been suddenly rejected in the past few months and 17,000 others have received no response.

The Spanish Justice Ministry defended the rejections, telling the paper that those who met the criteria “are welcome again to their country, but similarly, those who don’t meet the requirements will see that their application is rejected just like they would be in any other process.”

“It felt like a punch in the gut,” Maria Sánchez, 60, of New Mexico, whose application was rejected, told the paper. “You kicked my ancestors out, now you’re doing this again.”

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Both Portugal and Spain passed laws in 2015 granting citizenship to the descendants of Sephardic Jews, measures both governments said were intended to atone for the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula during the Inquisition.

The Spanish Inquisition Tribunal, a 19th century work by Spanish artist Francisco Goya. (Wikimedia Commons/CC BY)

The window for the Spanish law was supposed to close in 2019, but has been extended until September 2021 for those who began the legal process. The Portuguese law is open-ended.

In both countries, the government described the law as an act of atonement for the persecution and mass expulsion of Jews during the Inquisition that began in the 15th century. Many Jews were forcibly converted to Christianity.

The term “Sephardic” literally means “Spanish” in Hebrew. It is estimated that Sephardic Jews range between a fifth and a third of the world’s roughly 13 million Jews. For centuries Sephardic Jewish communities have maintained their customs and the Ladino language.

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